

SEPTEMBER 12, 1991

The sheep business has been mighty draggy in the Shortgrass Country for over a year now. Hard times, however, have been with the woolly operators nearly ever since sheep were introduced out here in 1877. By the next decade, cockleburrs were hurting wool prices, the Chicago stockyards was controlling the fat mutton market, and predators had developed a wide ranging taste for all sizes and ages of sheep.

To this day, nevertheless, San Angelo continues to be the largest sheep market in the nation. The auction and several yards handle sizable head counts every week; trucks and trailers bring big numbers any season of the year.

The worst omen this summer has been the dull replacement ewe lamb market and the indifferent stocker ewe trade. Large scopes of the sheep ranges have had a cool, wet summer. But these conditions, for the first time in sheepdom's history, have failed to put a flicker of spark in the stocker market.

Deregulation of the coyote packs in 1973 is the big reason for the decline in interest. Coyotes run the best winter country for oldcrop lambs in the state; West of the Pecos River, hundreds of thousands of acres of good ranges are kept free of sheep by an enormous population of these wasteful predators.

Mexican sheep buyers have made the brightest spot in the story. They have kept prices up on old weighing ewes and have also taken on quite a number of heavyweight feeder lambs.

We don't raise heavy lambs at the ranch, but our ewes wear out real fast, breaking their teeth on shelled corn and the hard cottonseed cubes that are standard handouts in hard winters. So raising six-year-old ewes on a five-year schedule is beginning to look better as the depression wears on.

The catch is finding a way to run cheap yearling ewes long enough to qualify for the foreign market and stop grieving over lamb and wool prices. All good economic advisers say to make long term plans. I've never talked to a banker that didn't want to know what was going to happen to his collateral in the future.

Unless things improve, we are going to have to call for a time out. The old boy who brought the first sheep out here was three years coming from California. In a way, he's to blame for our troubles. He had plenty of time to think over what he was doing.